

**fate my friend, you say the strangest things i find,
sometimes by dancewithink**

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Summary: Mike Wheeler expected a night of feeling left out while third wheeling for his sister and one of the boys she was dating on his first night out in New York City. But after meeting the halfling daughter of the Seelie King, this college freshman's year is bound to get a whole lot more exciting.

1. promises they break before they're made

Notes:

This is the first fic I'm uploading here. First ST fic as well. I don't have a beta so please inform me of errors.

Fic and chapter titles are from Someday by The Strokes.

Mike Wheeler can think of a hundred things he'd rather do than go to third wheeling for his sister and her boyfriend in a party. He wasn't twelve and he didn't need her help with socializing. She was taking her new role as his guardian way too seriously.

"Nancy, you really don't have to drag me to some stupid party just to make it up to me. Plus I'm making friends. I'd really rather binge something on Netflix tonight!" he near shouted as his sister dragged him off the couch.

"No, Mike. The nice man from the deli at the corner really doesn't count. Classes start next week. You've wasted two whole free weeks cooped up in here. Fucking Bushwick, Mike! You're not in Hawkins anymore. You need to take in the sights, the sounds, the people!" Nancy somehow managed to say in a solemn but incredulous tone.

She started rifling through clothes in their shared closet and it was Mike's cue to sit on his sister's bed in defeat.

"Bit overdramatic, Nance. Besides, I have made friends. Two actually," he said while smiling at the memory.

Nancy's eyes were like saucers when she tackled him with a hug. "And I'm only hearing about this now? I'm so happy for you," she said as she let him go with a smile.

"I know. I'm glad too. I passed by one of those converted warehouses and some guys were covering Inner City Blues. I stuck around a bit and then the next I know these guys - Lucas and Dustin - are inviting me to their place," he added.

"Did you go?" she said, even more surprised.

"Well, no. But we exchanged numbers so..." he trailed off.

"So you'll have to invite them here to return the favor at least and so I can make sure that they're not the type to drag you into seedy sex parties," she said in a tone too serious to sound like she was joking.

Instead of saying thanks, Mike threw a pillow at Nancy and she laughed before resuming to look for something the boy could wear among the piles of hooded sweatshirts and striped polos. The boy was left to lie on his back as a pile of shirts started growing beside him.

"Hey, Nance? I don't think I've thanked you properly for letting me hog your apartment instead of staying at the dorms. I'm sorry I'm cramping your style and I'll get a job to make up for."

"Cramping my style? You don't have to make up for anything so don't sweat it, Grandpa. Look, if anything, I'm the one who should be sorry for trading off a bigger apartment for a cooler neighborhood."

"Nancy, come on. I know I'm-"

"If it really bothers you, I can help you find a part-time job. But after that none of this talk, okay? I like having you here with me. Not that I'll admit I ever said that," she whispered the last bit and winked at her little brother.

Ever since their parents' divorce, Mike has to admit that he was a little out of it. He turned into a complete recluse and nearly failed an AP class until his sister planned an intervention when she got back to Hawkins for the holidays. He was glad too because he doubted that he would have been able to get into Lang let alone convince his mom to let him stay with Nancy if he wasn't able to handle the situation well. With Karen Wheeler and baby Holly in Florida at their grandparents', there really wasn't anything tying their family to Indiana. Ted had always been a stranger to them, the divorce was just proof.

"Okay remind me to take you shopping tomorrow because your wardrobe screams sad freshman fratboy," Nancy grumbled as she laid

out an outfit she chose on the bed.

"That coat looks great but I also know that it's not mine," he replied.

"Of course it isn't. A guy named Steve owns it. You can learn a thing or two from him. Hey, maybe he could even shop with us! Hang on, I'm texting him now," she said grabbing her phone.

"Steve? I thought you said his name was Jonathan."

"I don't have time to explain right now. I'm going to take the first shower. But yes, the guy you'll be meeting later is Jonathan"

"You haven't even told me where we're going yet," he decided to ask instead, knowing his sister enough that he didn't really want to know about the details of her love life.

"House of Yes!" she shouted as she closed the bathroom door.

Jane Ives walked in the apartment she shared with her flatmate and immediately slumped on one of the couches, grumbling yet again about how uncomfortable some of the pieces Will insisted on buying in flea markets are. She set the box she was lugging down and felt just how sore her body was. She figured maybe Will would take mercy on her for smudging a rug he had painstakingly dyed if he heard about just how stressful her day had been.

"Honey, I'm home!," she jokingly called out. She didn't hear an answer. She decided to check her phone and found an unread text.

el, i know i promised you a lazy saturday night but jonathan asked us to come with tonight. you're cool with that, right? i'm still at pratt so i'll probably get back late. owe you!

Sighing, she texted back.

you're lucky you're cute, byers. VERY lucky.

Now, she was regretting running errands for her mother all day. She had been looking forward to this night all week too. She even picked out the movies for tonight!

She really wanted to rest up but Will was probably excited to go to his first New York party. She had already been to House of Yes with some friends a while back. It was pretty fun and she was looking for a chance to tailored jacket she bought last week. Jane had no choice but to take a well-deserved bath to get her mood up. Too bad she left her bath bombs back at her Upper East Side loft. Why didn't she remember to grab those too?

She felt her phone vibrate from her side. Another text from Will.

oh by the way my brother's girlfriend is bringing her brother along with us. he's new in new york too! and a freshman like us :)

She could just sense that he was trying to be cheeky in that text.

well, then let's both cross our fingers and hope he's your type. someone has to appreciate your tasteful bedroom other than me.

She rolled her eyes at the reply. She can't believe she only just met Will last week and was now living with him. Looking at their apartment now, she is thankful to have met her talented and nerdy friend on their orientation at Pratt.

A MONTH AGO

"8,9,10. Huh. We're missing one person. Do any of you know -" the student guide had started looking at her list to check who was missing when a shout cut her off.

"Eleven!" the girl in question shouted and nearly ran into one of the girls in their group.

"Okay, Eleven. Glad to have you with us. Now, let's start the tour," the student guide started rambling.

Will Byers was raised right by his mom and brother so he did what he thought anyone ought to do and introduced himself to the latecomer.

"Hi, I'm Will. Will Byers. I'm taking Industrial Design, by the way. Are you okay, uhm I didn't catch your name..." he asked with his

winning smile.

The girl blinked and then snappishly replied, "Fine. Just have to catch my breath."

"Well, the guide asked us to pair up and the other kid said he didn't want to pair up with anybody so maybe you'd want to, Eleven? You don't mind if I call you, Eleven?" he said laughing to himself.

Will would not have known this but he had endeared himself to Jane that instant. Her parents names have always preceded her. Having a mom that was considered a modern genius in design and a father who sits in a pile of gold made it hard for her to form her own identity.

"Sounds cute actually," she replied, feeling a smile creeping up her face.

"Okay. That's my official nickname for you then, buddy. Cool dress by the way," the boy replied, not letting on his slight confusion.

"Maybeyoudwanttobemyflatmatebuddy?"

"Sorry? Can you repeat that?"

"Uhm. Want to be my flatmate...buddy?" El looked at him.

"Not the type to beat around the bush, huh?" Will said, surprise evident on his face.

The newly christened "Eleven" shook her head no.

"Are you serious? I mean I would love to but-" Will

"Already got a place?"

"No. I'm still searching. Housing prices are a bitch but-"

"I've been a total bitch too?"

"No. It's not that. You seem like a nice person actually but-"

"Totally possessive girlfriend or boyfriend?"

"No boyfriend at the moment but will you please let me finish my sentence?"

"Oh. Sorry. Of course."

"The problem is I don't know if I can afford the place even if we split. How much would the rent cost?"

"Well, it's already paid for. Not furnished yet but I was hoping to get some input from a flatmate who has great taste," she said slowly.

"That's really generous but I wouldn't want to take advantage."

"No. You would be helping me furnish plus my parents will not be pleased if they found out that I live alone in Brooklyn. Win-win."

The conversation was cut short when they noticed the whole group was staring at them.

"Since you are both so eager to let us in on your living arrangements, might I suggest for the young man to just take the offer so we can continue the campus tour in peace?" the guide said mockingly, clearly annoyed.

"That settles it, I guess," Will said, sheepish.

Eleven replied with a rare toothy smile.

"Here we are. Ta-da!" Will was proud to show his brother what he considered was his masterpiece.

Since El, pretty much gave him free reign when they started assembling furnitures and stuff, the place was really more his baby than hers. At first he was very hesitant to spend so much on the apartment but she insisted nothing was too extravagant or weird and gave him a peek at her bank account. The Byers have always lived on a tight budget so he let his imagination fly this time, even if he did feel guilty for doing so. The place that has a steampunk look to it may be a far cry from Castle Byers but it still has that whimsical Will touch.

"Holy shit, Will! You've been holding out on me. This is insane. God, it would be so cool to hang out here. Mom would be so proud" Jonathan gave his brother a big hug.

"Plenty of other opportunities for that. You really like it? It isn't too much?"

"It's freaking weird, Will. Why would I not like it? But it sure looks like it cost a lot," Jonathan finished with a worried look.

El emerged out of her room and answered to question hanging in the air to spare Will the trouble. She had been eavesdropping and wanted to give them a moment before greeting them.

"It was my idea to bother Will with decorating. I'm lucky he didn't charge me for his services. Hi. I've heard so much about you, Jonathan," she held out her hand.

"Likewise," Jon said as they shook hands. "I can't thank you enough for letting my brother stay with you."

"He's great company when I keep him away from his desk. Otherwise, I don't exist."

"Hey! No jokes at my expense," Will protested, good naturedly.

"She's taking care of all the other expenses. Better suck it up, bud," Jon quipped.

Eleven burst with laughter at that. Will acted hurt.

"Already ganging up on me!" Will huffed. "And are you planning on wearing that to the party?" he added, pointing at what looked like a silver diadem with wilting flowers and lace attached to it that she was carrying.

"Yes. It is a House of Yes event. They have themes," her tone implied that she meant to add 'obviously'.

"Shit. I didn't think to tell you, guys. I usually shoot on other days," Jonathan looked panicked and started making a call.

"I'll help you get ready for Full Moon," the girl said with an impish smile.

A confused Will had no choice but to follow El into her room.

Mike was starting to get nervous right when Nancy said that they were near the place. He'd only been to a party twice. It was his sister who managed to get high grades AND get into the good graces of the popular crowd. He usually hung out at the Wheelers' basement watching movies and trying to write songs with a battered guitar in hand.

"Oh look. There's Jonathan," Nancy pointed him out, pulling Mike out of his reverie.

"I thought I was third wheeling. He brought two people with him," he whispered to his sister.

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot to tell you. That's his brother and probably his brother's friend," she replied a bit dismissively then started on a light jog. "Jonathan! Jonathan! To your right!" she started shouting and waving at the tallest one in the group.

As they approached the group, Mike noticed that the guy his sister was dating looked a bit like River Phoenix which makes a lot of sense. Nancy near worshiped River. Judging by that love struck look she was sporting, she might be worshipping this guy too. Which looked a bit weird with him sporting ram horns for the party.

After squeezing the life out of Jonathan, Nancy then introduced him. "Mike, this is Jonathan."

He seemed to timid, didn't seem like a douche bag. Cool. He could probably get along with him.

"Hey, Mike. I see you're sizing me up. I have only good intentions, don't worry. It's my brother Will and his friend Eleven here that you gotta watch out for," Jon said with a quiet laugh.

The remark earned him a slight shove from a short boy with an innocent look about him. He had on his head what seemed to be

thorns and feathers. Where did they even get these costumes at the last minute? Then, he turned his gaze to the girl named Eleven.

She looked pretty. Really pretty. Even with that lace slightly covering her face. It was like he suddenly had tunnel vision. All he could see was her slightly upturned mouth, her cute little nose, eyes piercing straight through his soul...or shit, shit she really is looking at him. Probably amused at how stupid he must look right now. He realized that that he should say something.

"Wait. Hang on. There's five of us. Are you sure, we can all get in, Jon? We're pretty late and the glitter on me and my brother don't pass for a costume." Nancy then started pulling her boyfriend towards the already packed queue outside a building with a gigantic YES on its side.

"I think so. I mean I'm not counted. I'm going to photograph tonight so..." Jon trailed off and started to look unsure.

Nancy had that patented determined look on her face with a slight pout and Mike was sure the next few minutes is not going to be enjoyable. Luckily Eleven spoke up. She had a cute accent that he couldn't quite place.

"Don't worry. I know the people who run the place. I'll call them," she then excused herself to make a phone call before the older girl could reply.

Will raised a canvas bag he was holding. "She's letting us borrow some of her stuff for the party."

Nancy peeked inside the bag and took out a cross between a golden laurel and a halo crown.

"Wow. I need to find out where she shops for this. Only a few days in New York and you've already made friends with a really cool girl," she remarked at Will while trying it on.

"You don't even know half of it," was the boy's reply.

Mike took this as his cue.

Clearing his throat he starts, "So, Eleven is-

"An unusual name? It's just my nickname for her," he answered with a knowing smile.

"What's so funny?"

"You were very obvious, Mike."

"Really?"

"Painfully so. And here I was hoping that Nancy had a gay brother," Will said with such a genuine smile that Mike felt that could become really good friends. He then took out a huge dragonfly brooch from the bag. "We didn't know if you would like the horn and thorns. She didn't buy the trinkets. She made them so take good care of these, okay?"

He started attaching the brooch when Mike nodded.

"I could offer my wingman services to you tonight. Although, I wouldn't do a very good job at it," Mike said hoping that the smile he returned looked as heartfelt as the one he received.

"I'm good. Thanks," Will replied with a reassuring pat.

Eleven then returned and pulled the group away from the line and with a nod to the bouncer, they were in.

The music that was blaring inside was hypnotic. It sounded like ritual music and all around him it seemed that rituals were in fact being performed. There were aerial dancers who looked like they were wraiths afloat and letting swaths of fabric roam free.

To their left, there were people burning incense and getting rubbed with herbs, there were tarot readings, and when he squinted he was pretty sure behind a beaded curtain was a spot for massages.

It took Mike quite some time to take in the scene before him. He didn't even notice that he got left behind by the others. He decided that the bar was his safest bet, so he headed to the right side of the room. He took extra care not to bump into the people dressed with

antlers and those who seem to be covered solely with glitter.

By the time he reached the bar, he felt a bit winded. He badly needed a drink but the bartender was ignoring him. He felt a slight tap on his shoulder and was face to face with a familiar veiled face.

"Your sister is worried," Eleven said, sounding a bit accusing.

"Oh. Yeah. I guess I lagged behind. Felt that I needed a drink before braving the crowd," he replied, embarrassed.

She looked at his empty hands and offered him a small bottle she was holding.

"What is it?" he asked before taking a swig.

"Elixir," she answered with a shrug and a pointed look at small table behind them where a woman was handing them out.

It tasted sweet but had an unpleasant burning aftertaste. Mike had downed the bottle in one go.

"So, do you want to dance? I'm not very good but a lot of people seem to be content on just doing their thing," he said looking at the dance floor teeming with different versions of ritual dances.

"Yes," she replied as she made her way in, not even looking back to make sure he followed.

They picked a spot that wasn't too far from the middle. Eleven had her hands raised and was making alternately languid and fast flicking motions, losing herself in the music. Mike mostly thrashed around. He felt goofy but glad he was attempting to dance with El.

When the song ended, a woman's voice asked for everybody to clear the middle. Slowly, a group of women made their way to it. They were wearing artfully tattered dresses that looked as if made of spiderweb and drops of water. Their wild hair nearly covered their faces. When they were all in a circle at the middle, music started playing. It didn't sound like it came from the speakers but Mike couldn't see where the musicians were if it was playing live. He could identify a woodwind sounds, and chimes maybe, and bongos or

something similar.

The dancers had very varied movements but looked to be in synch. At first, Mike thought he was just imagining it. But it became clear that their feet weren't touching the ground. They were gliding through the air and going higher with each twirl they take. Then they held hands in a circle like a group of skydivers. Then they started chanting. After a full minute of doing so, they slowly descended. As their feet touched the ground, the dance music came back on in full blast. The crowd erupted with cheers.

Mike had never seen anything as exciting as that. He had once watched The Cirque du Soleil with his family but even that paled in comparison to what he just saw. He looked at Eleven to see if she shared his awe.

There was a dark spot on the white lace that was covering her face right below her nose. Eleven gripped his arm then, trying to steady herself.

"Are you okay? Do you want me to take you outside?" Mike said, worry etched on his face. The girl nodded.

Having left the building, El took off her headdress and wiped at the spot where blood was starting to dry. Mike was now able to see her face clearly. She was one of those people who looked awfully young but sported a mature expression, intelligent eyes.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Fine. Probably because of the heat," she answered lamely, still looking pale.

"Yeah. I used to get nosebleeds too. And it was getting pretty heated inside with that dance and all. How'd they even do that?" he said to lighten the mood.

"A favor," El whispered.

Mike didn't really know how to reply to that so he just asked her if she wanted to get back inside.

"No re-entry. Sorry," she said, apologetic.

"It's fine. But it is pretty early. I don't think the others would be going out soon." Mike looked up and down the street, looking for a place they could go.

"There's a garden around the corner. Just a few minutes then we go eat," she said with a question in her eyes.

Mike didn't want to disagree even though he was expecting mosquito bites with this plan. The walk to the garden was short but quiet. When Mike gets into a conversation, he usually never shuts up so he was careful to let her start one. However, El didn't seem to want to do that. She had been talking with him in very sparse sentences. He hoped that they can go beyond the unfamiliarity.

They soon reached the small garden. Eleven seemed to be regaining some color on her face as her hand grazed leaves and flowers.

Of all the nights they could have gone to House of Yes, they chose this one. To be fair, she should have just pretended to be sick when she found out that they were going to a Hargrove party. Her mood dropped as soon as they got off the cab. She immediately sensed that the people lining up were like her. She felt her defenses go up. Then there was that trouble going in.

Since she was avoiding his sister, she had to go and talk to Billy. Son of a bitch roped her into a circus act. If word gets out, she's toast.

"So how long have you and Will known each other?," Mike asked.

He was lanky and cute in a kind of nerdy way. She figured she might as well play nice with him since they still have a couple of hours to kill. She felt better now that they were far away from the place.

"A month or so. How long have you been in the city?" she decided to ask.

"Only for two weeks. How about you?"

There were two ways to answer that question. But she wasn't about

to explain the technicalities to a stranger.

"My whole life, I guess."

They could have just talked for awhile and maybe went for coffee somewhere to wait for the others who were probably having a raunchy good time at the House of Yes. But it just wasn't El's day.

Mike walked a little bit ahead of her and suddenly he was doing a fucking jig. Judging from his facial expression, he wasn't dancing in joy. He was terrified.

"What the fuck is happening?! I can't stop my legs!"

El didn't need to look closer. She was sure that he was in a circle of mushrooms. She could think of one person who would put those for laughs.

"Real mature, Maxine. Let him go."

"Just one more minute, princess. I mean you have to admit. He looks ridiculous!" a redheaded girl appeared from behind a tree a few steps away from the pair.

"Let him go," El said with a leer.

"Fine. Jeez. You're no fun," the other girl rolled her eyes.

Mike slumped to his knees as he regained control over his body. "How'd she do that?" he said, looking at El.

"Mike, this is Maxine. She's an asshole who puts great effort on pranks," she said, very annoyed.

The girl in question sauntered over with a mischievous smile. She offered her hand to Mike who was still on the ground.

"It's Max. I don't reveal the tricks of the trade, Mike. You'll have to figure that on your own," she said as she helped him up.

"You've been avoiding me," Max then faced Eleven.

"Not you," the short haired girl replied.

"He just wants to talk," Max said impatiently. "The moon is full."

"Fine," Eleven acquiesced. "Mike, you go on ahead. Tell Will I'm going to my father's tonight. I'm sorry I've ruined your night," she told the disappointed boy.

"Okay. Just promise me you'll be safe," he said as he glowered at Max.

"Yeah. Promise," she replied, a bit unnerved by his boldness.

With that the two girls left, leaving the poor boy alone and in the dark in both a literal and figurative sense.

It took two hours before Mike reunited with his sister. He did as Eleven told him but added that she went with a long haired redhead who was wearing a gown like the one the Corpse Bride had on. Will had accepted this explanation and said that maybe Max also came from the House of Yes. Mike had his doubts but he didn't share the rest of what happened so it was pointless. They got coffee, Mike had his second cup of the night, and then parted ways.

His sister had a massive headache when a guy named Steve came by their apartment on a Saturday afternoon. He was a lot different from Jonathan but the way he was feeding Nancy Chow mein made it obvious that he adored her. So Mike felt a little sad that his sister might be cheating on two nice guys.

Their time at the thrift shop was pretty short because Nancy just felt worse by the hour. Luckily Steve seemed to be a pro at these kind of scenarios. He kept making jokes and cooing at the younger Wheeler whenever he approved of an outfit. Occasionally calling Mike a heart breaker, much to his embarrassment. After five Steve-approved full outfits, they decided to head back.

When Mike spotted Jonathan on their street, he was very nervous. But it turned out that the three loved each other equally.

His looming first day in college wasn't enough to distract him from

thinking about the mysterious girl with the number for a nickname. He had been daydreaming of bumping into her again the whole day. Processing this new information about his sister's romantic relationship wasn't enough to do that either

Hating himself just a bit, he took out his phone. Checking that the trio were engrossed on movie that was playing, he texted Will.

Is she home yet?

He got a reply from his new friend almost instantly.

no. :(but i wouldn't be too worried yet.

End Notes:

Might have to bump the warning and rating in the future. This will be a short fic. I'm thinking five chapters at most? I promise to introduce the rest of the characters next chapter!

You can read this on AO3 where I put up links for what I envisioned for their apartments and outfits.

2. Chapter 2

Notes: I'm so sorry this took so long. This has been sitting in my drafts untouched since January. I couldn't find the energy to finish it. When I started this fic, I wanted to give you guys long chapters with atleast 10k words. Now, I'm just going to upload this so it doesn't go to waste but I want you to know that I don't plan on working on this fic anymore. Hope you like this final post.

As Eleven and Max walked down the block, they were both silent. It was clearly written on El's face that she did not find the stunt that the other girl had pulled on Mike even slightly amusing. She didn't exactly know where they were headed but didn't want Max to get the satisfaction of having her speak first. Max wasn't the type to apologize so she just let her friend stew. Thankfully, a corgi seemingly popped out of nowhere to break the ice. It sprinted towards them and started nipping at the end of the brunette's ankle trousers.

"Oh, good to see you little Elion!" El stooped down a bit to give him a quick pat. The dog licked her hand and lied down for a belly rub. She humored him and laughed as he wiggled in joy.

"The mutt gets a nice warm greeting yet you cannot spare your good friend a smile? You know he is not allowed outside but I took him with me because I knew you missed him," Max complained, jokingly. She was genuinely hurt but not one to risk showing a moment of weakness. A trained combatant never puts her guard down. Especially one of faerie descent and so highly favored by the Seelie Court.

"I don't recall you craving for affection like your pet, Max. Is your raging fire dulling into a soft ember?" El replied with a conciliatory smile. It was unfortunate that she had always been wary of the other girl. Everytime she got out of the other realm, she forgot that she had people on her side among the Fae. But Max was volatile and tricks came to her far too easily. El couldn't stomach this facet of her personality.

Max took what she said as an unsaid apology and then stooped as well, rubbing Elion by the ears. "The mortals were right in guessing that corgis and the fae have a bond but imagine us riding this boy into Faerie like a steed. What a bunch of fools!" She let out one of her soft tinkling laugh that always sounded partly menacing to El's halfling ears.

It was jokes like this that always made Eleven uncomfortable. Her childhood friend had always harbored a strong disdain for humans. She once had a hunch that it was an act to convince her to take a permanent residence at the Court Castle. But after finding out about the Billy and his decision to be one of the solitary fae, she knew that the girl's reason ran deep. Perhaps it was still painful for her to know that her stepbrother chose to live among human rather than raise her.

Just then a cab came by and Max called for it. El raised an eyebrow at her friend. It was one thing for a pureblood to be at the heart of a city but stepping inside a cab would be torture. Even without direct contact, the iron and it's alloys would burn Max.

"Do not worry too much. Your father was kind enough to lend me this," said the redhead as she raised a bracelet on her left wrist. It was clearly warlock-made and looked to be of good craftsmanship. The amethyst charm contrasted beautifully with her pale skin.

When Max entered the car with a set jaw, it did seem to do the trick. Still, El asked for the windows to be pulled down, hoping that the night breeze could ease Max's nerves. The girl did look afraid but was holding the fidgety Elion close to her chest.

"Where to, ladies?" the cabbie asked once they were settled.

"Pelham Bay Park," Max replied. She was trying to soothe her pet who was making little yipping noises.

"At this hour? In those nice clothes?" he remarked in a suggestive tone. There were tons of weird shit that went down at this hour in the City That Never Sleeps.

"We do not have all day," El snapped at him. She fixed him with a stare that intended to shut him up.

The poor man raised his hands as if in surrender. "Alright. Just trying to make conversation. Just be careful not to let the dog mess up the seats, alright?," he said before speeding off.

Eleven was not happy to have been called for by the King. She always dreaded when she had to come stay with her father, even for short visits which this one hopefully is. She was only allowed to spend time living with her mother Terry Ives when she was 10 years old. By that time, she had gained enough control over her abilities to avoid exposing herself or pose as a risk. She fought hard for the chance to live in New York. The Fae are none too kind to outsiders and even less kind to those who might divulge their well-kept secrets. She was in the very unpleasant position of being in both categories. No one could fault her for wanting to get away from the realm.

Early in her childhood, she had needed to prove that she was strong enough not to be a victim. Although the Seelie are more mild-mannered compared to their counterpart, they are still vicious when wronged. Anyone could challenge the Seelie King's right to the throne, but being one of his daughters made Jane a possible heir. This never did sit well with the proud race and any sign of the King doting on her was often called a betrayal behind locked doors.

Those who aren't privy to the entire truth attributed the minor uprising that some of King Martin's most loyal followers staged to the girl's sudden place in the court and her privilege to travel between realms. However, the real reason was far more sinister. Eleven is sure that Max has not been made aware of it yet. If she did, Max would have already driven a dagger to her heart.

They got off the cab near the park entrance. Max and Elion scrambled to get out of the car as soon as it came to a stop. Relief was so evident on both their faces that El could not help but chuckle.

As soon as the cab drove off, Max gave a little triumphant whoop. "I will never subject myself to that kind of ordeal ever again," she vowed, dramatically.

As they entered the park, El hoped that they wouldn't encounter anyone on the way. During one of the times she visited Fae through Central Park, she almost got mugged. Of course, the guy ended up

regretting approaching her in the first place but that doesn't mean that El enjoyed punishing him.

The three started their way to the inland oak forest by hiking the Kazimiroff Trail. The full moon gave off enough of its eerie light that El's halfling eyes could see just fine even without the lamp posts. As they veered off the concrete walkways, Max took off her flimsy sandals. She looked extremely glad to be barefoot once again. Elion barked with happiness as the surrounding looked more like his home.

Watching the other girl skip ahead, Eleven was reminded of how much she had envied her when they were children. Her friend had resembled Queen Titania whom all fae children read about in their history studies. She also shared the fierce energy and boldness that the late queen was known for. In short, Max was every bit like the epitome of a Summer Court faerie. Eleven had hoped to be more like her. She constantly wished that her dull brown hair would turn light and that her slight frame would get more athletic. But those days were behind her. She did not wish to live up to the standards of anyone but herself.

They veered away from the path when they reached the oaks. Max hummed in delight as they ventured into the more undisturbed part of the forest. Their steps took a more hurried pace as home beckoned them. Elion, having sensed the pickpocket up ahead, sprinted into a mad dash. El had only used this particular entrance twice, often opting for the one in Central Park which led directly to the castle. The one they were about to enter was the door between this realm and Gleam Clearing.

All over the world, entrances to Faerie such as this existed. Big rock formations, treetrunks, hills, and even ice could be unsuspecting doorways to another world. Just as the face of the earth changed over time, so did the locations of the pickpockets. Magic was as malleable as nature. Just like nature, it was alive. The topography of Faerie was even more chaotic as the laws of nature didn't exactly apply there in the same way. Even Time itself, misbehaved.

The air started to buzz even before they spotted the pickpocket. The forest was undoubtedly more alive here. The canopies looked more luscious and the trees draped in brighter hues. Then, El saw it. With

each step they took towards a big moss covered pile of rock, the sound of soft tinkling chimes coming from beneath the earth grew stronger. It was a serenade that seeks to lure human trespassers to a life of tricks disguised as treats or death. The effects of magic emanating from the very ground was starting to show. El saw that Max was already sporting the pointed ears and her eyes, now devoid of pupils, were pure blue. She didn't to look at herself to know that she had undergone the same changes. The redhead motioned for her to do the honors, to open the gate.

El rested her hand on the mound. She felt the magic probing into her mind, examining her intentions and memories. It knew her. It remembered. With tears streaming down her face, she spoke softly.

"King's daughter, youngest
Open the door.
Hast thou forgotten
Thy promises made
At the fountain so clear
'Neath the lime tree's shade
King's daughter, youngest
Open the door."

The door started to open slowly. The rock seemed to cave into a door of light. It shimmered brighter with the passing of each moment. It beckoned at them. Elion went in first, eager to come home. Sensing El's hesitation, Max intertwined her hand with hers as they plummeted in.

It only took a few seconds before they stumbled onto familiar soft grass. Despite her

Gleam Clearing was a sight to behold on a normal day but the celebration taking place made it look like a picture of heavenly desires. The dancing lights were a constant but the overflow of food and silk were not. Trays filled with small cakes and berries flitted about. Glasses with bright fluids replenished on their own. The place was surrounded by gossamer walls adorned with flowers that moved into varying patterns as if fluid.

But most enchanting of all were the fae of the Seelie. Some wore

more a simple attire like Max but most of them looked luscious in lavishness. The regalia of human royalty could not compare to a common faerie dressed to the nines. Unbothered by nudity, there are those who looked as if wearing nothing but skin dipped in gold or gems. They came in all sizes and hailed from different places. Selkies and other aquatic fair folk looked to be encapsulated in running water. Winged fair folk had their own dancefloor a couple of feet above the rest. Various anatomical differences were also evident. Gills, webbed hands, antlers, hooves, and scaled skin could be found among guests. What the unearthly crowd had in common were the eyes of a singular solid color. The party back in New York couldn't compare to a real revel.

Walking towards the throng, they were greeted by two faeries who have been with El since she was small. Kali and Hopper were her tutors and advisers. Both were strong and invaluable members of the court as well. El regards them with much begrudging respect because although they were the ones who trained her enough to be in a bargaining position with the King, they were also the reasons why the opportunity was nearly taken from her. After Max had escorted her, she excused herself.

"Apsenniel, we are glad that you are home again," Kali said with enthusiasm, although to human ears her voice sounded bored. Her body was covered in black liquid that went up to her neck. She looked like she was in one of those dominatrix body suits that El often saw in kinky parties.

"I thought we agreed not to call me that," El replied coolly.

"It is pointless to try to hide from your true self. You should not be ashamed of your Fae name," Hopper said gruffly. His build made him look very imposing. Even in Faerie standards, he was old. For centuries, he has been the head of the Wild Hunt. Here in his faerie gentry clothes, he still looked like too big and too wild for this place.

"I can lie and I don't get my high on other people's expenses. Couldn't be anymore farther away from Fae if you ask me," she replied with a bit of venom.

"You say you despise us because we are cruel of heart. So spare us

this hostility," Hopper responded, unperturbed.

"We should greet Father," Kali said to break off the tension.

They walked towards the other side of the clearing where a seat encrusted with jewels was on a dais made of bark. On the throne sat the King of the Seelie Court. His white hair contrasted with his black eyes. His skin had cracks like glass but his clothes were pristine. He held himself in a way that only a being of immense power and pride can. El abhorred him.

"Daughter of mine, how nice to see your face again. I only wish you were not wearing those distasteful clothes," King Martin said as a greeting.

"If I say that it pleases me to see you as well, I would be untrue. And this is Alexander Mcqueen. Both Mother and I have an impeccable eye. Although her taste in men is certainly questionable," El replied.

Others might not notice the slight change in the set of his mouth but El knew that she had pissed her father big time.

"There is just no pleasing you, nowadays. Presuming that you would not like to enjoy the revel, it is best if we talk in a more private place," he said in a deadly tone. As he rose from his seat, part of the dais at his side opened up to reveal a passage. He went in while El and her tutors followed. As soon as the three had descended, the entrance closed behind them.

Illuminated solely by a trail of light left by the King, she felt like a caged animal. It felt like they could have been there for hours but she was sure that it only took them minutes. El thought that the path tunneled into the castle but she had guessed wrong. When they finally reached the exit, she saw that they were at the outskirts leading to the Badlands.

She had been here before but now she sensed something malevolent lurking just beyond. What had once been teeming brush is now wasteland. It was as she had feared. She had opened a wound and left it unattended. It wouldn't matter how hard she tries to stay away. Sooner or later, she would have to face the festering, the rot.

Facing the gloomy expanse ahead, the King said, "What do the two of you have for me?"

"Yesterday, ten men rode with me. We spread out for a twelve mile perimeter. From here onwards, there looks to be no sign of life. The land is poisoned but it doesn't seem to be dark magic," Hopper said grimly.

"I have requested an audience with the Unseelie Court. My little birds tell me that King Samuel is becoming more restless and volatile as this spreads to their side of Fae. It's reasonable for him to suspect that we know something. He could wage a war with us if we do not forge an alliance. We have to tell him what we know," Kali added.

"And you, Apsenniel? What can you make of that?," King Martin addressed his daughter.

"You have already asked enough of me," she replied obstinately.

"Is there no guilt in your heart? If this spreads, our people will be brought to its knees."

"You talk as if it was I who perpetuated this madness when it is your greed to blame!"

"There will come a time for retribution but for now we must take action," the Master of the Hunt intercepted.

"As a courtesy, I will let your bold words slip for now, Hopper. But do not think that I did not hear your thinly veiled threat."

"Forgive me for speaking out of line but all this bickering benefits no one," the chief intendant murmured.

"What would you have me do? Willingly go back there? I am no knight. I do not envy heroes their honorable death," El spat out.

"Child, only you were able to wander into the heart of the Badlands," Hopper admitted sadly.

"We've been searching the scrolls for answers but have come up with nothing. Nobody else has reached that far in all of history," Kali

added.

"Name your price," the King acquiesced.

"If I do this, I get to denounce my faerie lineage and my claim to the throne."

"You do realize that the consequence of being banquished is that you will not be welcome into Fae any longer, don't you?" he said with a cynical smile.

"I have never been welcome here," said El with a tone of finality.

Mike's first week at NYU was nerve-wrecking to say the least. He was a fish out of water in a pool of kids who walked with purpose. They carried themselves with an absurd amount of confidence. Before his classes started, his syllabi got him excited. Now that he's met his professors, they have become daunting. Nancy says that the jitters will wear off soon enough. Still, he thinks that maybe he won't be able to shake it off since his original plan was MIT and writing was just a pipe dream for so long.

A particular class was already biting him in the ass. On his first day with Mr. Booth, infamously nicknamed Satan after his facial hair and his affinity for handing failing grades, the man had required them to have understood *Paradise Lost*. The pop quiz that came before the class discussion seemed like gibberish to Mike. Listening to the professor drone about Samarchand, Chersonese, and Motesume only had him scratching the back of his head. Weren't they supposed to be talking about the God, the angels, and Adam and Eve?

He also couldn't figure out how the week passed by without him making any friends. By New York standards, he was adjusting too slow. He should be paying more attention if he wanted to do more than get by.

To blow off some steam, his sister suggested that they invite Lucas and Dustin over for dinner on a Friday. The three boys got along so well together that a noise complaint from the tenant below forced them to continue their night outside. Nancy opted to stay in and

insisted that they go on a boys' night out.

They went to Josie Woods Pub where Mike is told that a lot of NYU kids go to for drinks. The Waverly Place crawl had a casual, college-keg-party vibe. It wasn't rowdy and that was fine by Mike whose spirits rose as soon as he stepped in. They chose to stick to beer and easy conversation instead of getting smashed. They ordered fajitas and the nachos primos at Dustin's insistence.

Lucas revealed that he was taking a gap year because the political climate got him backing out of trying for the Air Force. Dustin was determined to take culinary arts but didn't get the much needed scholarship so he was helping out at his grandfather's pizzeria until atleast the following semester. The two boys didn't seem too perturbed with their current predicaments which made Mike feel that his anxieties were unwarranted. When he voiced this out, it was quickly denied by his audience. Dustin smoothly changed the subject after stating simply that the weight of one's troubles may not always be determined by another.

"So has anybody caught your eye at NYU? Hey, maybe she's here right now!" Dustin said in a loud and slurred voice as he whipped his head back and forth across the room.

"There is someone...but she doesn't go to NYU," Mike confessed.

"Girl from home? Tough luck," Lucas sympathized.

"No. She's born and raised here. Goes to Pratt," cleared the smitten boy.

"She's probably a schmuck. The whole school is populated with trust fund babies. Either that or she's got the crazies. What did you say her name was?" questioned his friend.

"I didn't. Her name's Eleven," Mike said sheepishly.

"Like the number?" asked an incredulous Lucas.

"Uh oh. Definitely the crazies. My older brother dated a girl who went there and she wanted to be a literal starving artist. But the problem was she was rich. I mean like mansion at the Hamptons and

Upper East Side townhouse rich. So this girl, she had a name like Olga or something, started cutting up hundred dollar bills around campus and calling it performance art. One time, my brother had to stop her from eating her credit card. She was going to snap it into little pieces and mix it in with her Campbells," divulged Dustin.

"Either you're just messing with me or you fell for your brother's cute little story," Mike said, unconvinced.

"Man, I wish he was lying but it's all true. You're better off with a kale-eating hipster girlfriend than a Pratt kid," Lucas mumbled.

"I'll admit that they are some things about her that weird me out but if she gives me a chance, I'm taking it," Mike fessed up.

"Dude, you have to heed the signs! Ignoring red flags is a rookie mistake," cried Dustin in exasperation.

"And you must be such a pro at this to have so much wisdom to impart to amateurs like me." Mike

"You know it. I'm a hit," as if to prove his point, Dustin followed it with a growl.

"And here you discredit us just when we have our case built."

"Hey! Everybody who gets to hear that purr finds themselves wanting to get a piece of me."

"A real piece of work. A fat pain in the ass."

"I think you meant bootylicious. Besides, I'm not the one calling myself Chocolate Daddy."

"Damn right. I'm the one with the black boy magic. Anyway, Mike, why don't you introduce us to her? We're great judges of character."

"We totally have your back, dude. We'll steer you away from the bad nuts."

"Not sure I want to do that," replied Mike with a schooled apologetic expression.

"Oh. Well, that's fine," Lucas said awkwardly.

"Yeah. We got so carried away that we kinda forget that you barely know us," Dustin followed, equally embarrassed.

"No. It's not like that. I mean, I'm trying to get her to notice me. I can't risk getting out-shadowed by you guys. I think I have enough competition as it is," Mike said in such a serious tone that when he finally broke into a laugh, his new friends started pelting peanuts at him.

"You really have to let us meet her now, asshole. I felt so bad," the curly haired boy admitted, chuckling. Him and Lucas shared a look that meant that they were in an agreement that Mike would make a delightful addition to their little party.

"I haven't even texted her yet. The closest I've got was asking her flatmate if she got home safe."

"Was the roommate the overprotective, distrustful to all men type of friend or the encouraging, my-friend-needs-to-go-out-more type?"

"I don't really think HE fits into any of those stereotypes. He's new to the city like me."

"You think he's into her too? Roommates falling for each other is a classic trope."

"He isn't into girls."

"So basically, the only thing stopping you is yourself. Dude, you have to man up. If she's really such a catch, someone else is going to make a move on her before you know it."

"Mike, you are texting her tonight."

"What?!! A minute ago, both of you were telling me to stay away from her."

"That's what friends do."

"Friends, huh?"

"Yes. Good friends. Look, there's a little show happening at 538 Johnson this Friday. The same guys you saw playing when we met are in it. Why don't you invite El and her friend to go with us."

"Yeah. It'll be great, Mike. Fair warning though. It gets wild there. But it'll be like a test. If she's too posh for that kind of stuff, you're too good for her"

"What if I'm the one who ends being too much of a wimp for it?"

"Nah. You? You're going to love it."

When Mike gave into the plan, the boys made him down three tequila shots. He's had her number saved on his phone since Will forwarded it two days ago. Will wasn't the type to hand out a friend's number but had found himself rooting for Mike. He had said so rather unsubtly.

Mike drafted three versions of the invitation before settling with the one that most assumed a casual air but unmistakably expressed a desire to her again. He re-read it studiously before nervously hitting send.

Entering the doors of the converted church that was her mother's home, El couldn't help but admire the work of a sharp eye and dignified taste. Terry Ives is nothing if not meticulous, especially when it came to her own home. Lavish but not gaudy, modern but exuding with charm, one could not mistake the talent at hand. She had come from a family that valued strict sensibility and Catholic values over imagination and ambition. When she left for New York, setting aside her previous inhibitions came easy. Fairies are a proud race which liked pretty things. It was no wonder how the King of Seelie could have fallen for her and had her bearing his child.

The effects of his previous affection was evident in her design choices, atleast to El. Her choosing to build a home on hallowed ground and the switch of medium from wood and fiber to iron and other alloys wasn't brought by a religious re-awakening as people suspected. It would be unknown to the rest of the world that her greatest design so far is re-building her life in such a way that

protected her daughter in the only way that she thought she could.

The door to her mother's office was ajar so El stepped in. Terry was primly seated in a vintage upholstered wrought iron chair by her window, staring blankly ahead. With her slender build and fair amber hair, she looked like a bird trapped in her own iron cage. El must made a sound because the woman turned to her with a sweet smile.

"It's a good thing you decided to visit. I was starting to think that you've forgotten me. Come sit with me," Terry said, gesturing to the seat opposite hers.

"Mama, I did tell you that Martin called for me last weekend. Plus, first week of classes had me surprisingly busy," explained El as soon as she was seated.

Terry offered her some tea but El declined, wrinkling her nose in distaste. Tea was always served in Seelie and so she preferred coffee over it.

"What did he want from you this time? Couldn't he ask for your sister to deal with it?" the older woman asked between sips.

"Apparently not," she grumbled.

"There's more to the story?"

"It's because of something he forced me to do. I wish I could pin the entire blame on him so that I could decline...but no matter how I look at it, I'm still responsible."

"Honey, I know that you keep things for me so I could be safe from it. And I know I said that I only want to know what I strictly need to. But I'm always here to listen. Especially when it gets bad."

"I'm scared, Mama," she whispered, eyes downcast.

"How bad is it?" Terry ventured.

"If...if it doesn't get resolved, it may start a war or worse," was the reply that left El's trembling lips.

"Christ. I'm going to strangle that son of a bitch! He's putting that much weight on your shoulders? Honey, is there's anything I can do to help?"

"Honestly? I'm just trying to keep my mind off it for now."

"Right. Got it. So how's Pratt? Did they give you special treatment?"

"Why does it sound like you want them to?" El asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Please allow me to have this. I think I'm having my mid-life crisis."

"You are so dramatic."

"Now you know where you got it from."

El's phone goes off, interrupting their light banter. She receives text from someone she didn't expect. It was a nice surprise that would certainly amuse her mom.

"My old man is going to kill me if he finds out about this." Steve whines as he lags behind.

They were scaling the Red Hook Grain Terminal so Jon can take a couple of pictures. Lots of photographers have already done this in the past so it's more like a little outing for the three than a serious shoot.

"There are worse things than trespassing." Nancy says with gritted teeth as she nearly slips and takes a fall.

"Nancy, please. We are not trespassers. We're urban explorers!" Jon exclaims in faux indignation with eyes trained on his girlfriend's slight frame. He's not about to admit it but he's already regretting taking them here. He's super close to getting a heart attack. If either of his lovers get so much as a scrape, he's taking them home.

"Like modern versions of Christopher Columbus or Ferdinand Magellan?" Steve asks, looking proud of himself that he still knew a bit about world history.

"Ew. They were colonizers and most likely slave traders. We're more like Amelia Earheart." Nancy rolls her eyes at the pout that appears on Steve's face.

"Except we're not going to get lost, right?" Steve whispers, unsure if he wants to know the answer.

"It's good to get lost once in a while," Jon replies with a not so reassuring smile.

"No thanks. I'm good. Since when have you been doing this anyway? I barely get to see your bad boy side. I think I may be swooning right now," Steve jokes. They were definitely high enough that falling off this ramp they were on would break their necks.

"Invite us over to your place tonight and maybe you'll get to see more of him," Jon answers with a smirk.

"Boys, now is not the time and place to be getting all hot and heavy. Can it wait till I have free hands so I can fan myself atleast?" Nancy joins in.

"Oh, I can think of a couple of better uses for those hands," Jon says, chuckling.

"Damn, Jon. Give papa a bite," Steve said in an equally husky voice and got the other two laughing.

Nancy started planning her life at seven years old. Striving hard to reach it, it had seemed foolproof and well within her reach. She had wanted to be a doctor. It was Harvard Med or nothing. If she had dreamt of New York, it was only in the hopes of residency at Mount Sinai or John Hopkins. If the old Nancy could see her now, she would be shocked and maybe even appalled. Although she had never considered herself square, she was certainly not this liberal. The neat little townhouse with six to seven figure salary was just a fancier version of their quiet home at the cul de sac.

She guiltily thinks that her parents' divorce was a blessing in disguise. The intensity of her mother's dissatisfaction and her defeated countenance awakened something inside of Nancy. She was forced to

rethink life. She began to ponder on the important difference between companionship and passion, to pit stability and excitement against each other. It was in this line of thinking that she had made her decision with Jonathan and Steve. Where other people were forced to choose between disappointments, she was fortunate to get a third option. Luck and imagination drove her to where she was now.

The pungent smell snapped her out of her reverie. She didn't want to go further. The smell brought her back to the time she discovered their poor dog one morning with a litter of dead puppies at her feet. It brought her back to that time she accidentally saw her Aunt Marcy taking off a bandage on her festering leg.

"Nance, what is it?" she could hear Jonathan's voice but it sounded far away. Her brain told her to stay in place but her feet dragged her forward. Each step she took felt heavier than the last. Her pace was picking up speed along with her heartbeat. Just as she was about to jump off a ledge to get to other one adjacent to it, a pair of hands yanked her back.

Enclosed in Steve's arms, she could feel herself snapping out of it. When she finally takes a peek from where her head is buried on her boyfriend's chest, she witnesses the oddest look on Jonathan's face as he lowers the camera he had pointed to the direction where she felt herself being pulled into.

Jon looks at the photo he just took and informs the other two that it is time to go home.